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Why Covid Keeps Winning

We didn't learn a thing.

GREGG GONSALVES and WALKER BRAGMAN

President Joe Biden returns to the White House on July 23, 2024, after a Covid isolation period in Delaware.
(Andrew Leyden / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

On July 17, the White House announced that Joe Biden had contracted Covid-19. The 81-year-old president joined legions of Americans stricken by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the latest wave of a pandemic that he had boasted about "ending" just 10 days before while delivering remarks in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

When the United States hit 100,000 Covid deaths in late May 2020, *The New York Times* called it "an incalculable loss" on its front page. Instead of a reported story, the *Times* ran 1,000 obituaries of the dead to remind its readers that "they were not simply names on a list. They were us."

Four years later, however, that "incalculable loss" almost looks quaint. The SARS-CoV-2 virus, which studies have linked to all kinds of troubling health complications—from cardiovascular problems like heart attacks to neurological problems—continues to circulate, mutate, kill, and disable. The death toll has increased twelvefold since May 2020. As of March, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 17 million Americans report living with what has become known as "long Covid," a condition that can be mild or, as the Department of Health and Human Services noted in a November 2022 report, can disrupt a person's "entire sense of self."

Despite this continued threat, particularly to the immunocompromised, the nation's political leaders on both sides of the aisle have decided, as the president declared, that the crisis is over. Even Biden's.. himself getting Covid at a moment of especially heightened scrutiny does not appear likely to change that message.

As of this writing, the national emergency declaration and the public health emergency have long since ended. Schools and workplaces are wide open. Federal relief programs that were put in place early on in 2020 have expired. There are no stimulus checks coming in the mail and no federal vaccine or mask requirements—even in medical settings. Free mass testing is over, and the federal government is no longer purchasing vaccines or treatments, which has allowed manufacturers to predictably hike up prices. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, meanwhile, has dropped its quarantine guidance, and the National Institutes of Health Covid treatment guidelines are set to be taken offline in mid-August.

To the extent that we talk at all about Covid today, it's as a sort of national bloodletting—a rewriting of history at the expense of science. Congressional Republicans, for example, have been holding hearings to get to the bottom of whether the nation overreacted to a crisis that has left over a million dead and whether the nation's leading public health officials were too quick to dismiss an unsupported hypothesis about the virus's origins. Meanwhile, on Elon Musk's X (formerly Twitter), right-wing misinformation spreaders and conspiracy theorists claim vindication for their opposition to public health efforts—lockdowns, school closures, and mask and

vaccine mandates—and attack credible scientists, garnering thousands of likes per post.

But Covid revisionism is not just a right-wing phenomenon. It's gone mainstream. The embrace of this bad hindsight has been fast and furious by some of the most respected legacy media outlets in the country. These publications have churned out piece after piece suggesting we did well in our response to the virus; we overreacted to the virus at the expense of children's futures; we need a reckoning with lockdowns; we ought to embrace the "lab leak" origin of SARS-CoV-2 despite the preponderance of evidence supporting a zoonotic origin of the virus. They have even gotten on the Fauci-bashing bandwagon of the far right, blaming him for the collapse in trust in public health.

All of this is ridiculous. As President Biden's recent bout with Covid demonstrates, we are nowhere near being out of the woods with the pandemic—and that is precisely because we did *not* overreact to it. Quite the opposite, in fact. Compared to our G7 peers, the United States did terribly. The federal response was extremely limited, and people died and are still dying because of it. This year alone, according to the CDC, nearly 26,000 Americans have died from the virus.

Our country never made the requisite investments in clean air upgrades for buildings. Despite botching our vaccination campaigns, we have refused to impose universal Covid safety rules for workplaces. Although one of the earliest recommendations from the World Health Organization was to remove financial barriers to care, our country still doesn't have a universal healthcare system. We have even watched millions of Americans get stripped from the Medicaid rolls, while 10 states still refuse to expand Medicaid eligibility. Meanwhile less than half of states have guaranteed paid medical leave.

These are important stories to tell over and over. They represent significant failures of leadership across the aisle. We cannot humanely move on from the pandemic without making basic changes to adapt to life with Covid. That we are expected to is an abdication of responsibility by elected officials, who are seemingly willing to write off the health and safety of our society's most vulnerable as a cost of doing business.

We can do better.

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